



The Room for Improvement Project

Exploring Self-esteem. Unpacking the Barriers to Black women's Well-being.

Report of a Major Project submitted to the Faculty of Environmental Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Environmental Studies, York University Ontario, Canada. Supervisor: Sarah Flicker, PhD

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Foreword

For the past two and a half years, I have been consciously searching for myself. On my journey of self-discovery, I found myself thinking about other Black women, too. The Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University offered a peculiar program whereby graduate students can formulate their own plan of study. It was a wonderful idea to literally charter my own course, but it was also very challenging in the sense that there is so much to know –not just about myself, but- about Black women on a whole. It was hard to construct an explicitly concise plan. *Where should I start? What aspect of our lives and experiences should be the foci? Why Black women?* I pondered all these questions. I wondered why I was so gung-ho about documenting something about ordinary Black women while other students in this faculty cared about climate change, AIDS, water accessibility, community art, transportation, and pollution –to name a few other areas of concentration. I couldn’t help myself from empathetically philosophizing about the plight of Black women which subsequently called attention to my own particular struggle. With that being said, my plan of study has been modified multiple times. However, the component that remains constant and central in my area of concentration is Black women. Our centrality is fostered by a compulsion to learn more about us. My strong desire to know is what led me on a scholarly quest into Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and inspired my critical vigilance on –and in- the lives of Black women.

Jin Haritaworn’s graduate course formerly named *Feminist Perspectives in Environmental Studies* and *New Social Movements*, respectively, introduced me to some terms, concepts, and stories that helped me to better conceptualize and contextualize my plan of study. Intersectionality is one of the concepts that are pertinent in BFT. Intersectionality, as an approach, helps to illuminate the manifold and simultaneous oppression that afflicts and affects the Black female body. It is a tool used to unpack the many layers of identity. In *Feminist Perspectives*, for example, I was introduced to Tiffany King’s dissertation titled *In the Clearing*. This work offered provocative insight into the role and functions of the Black female body for the purposes of supporting and expanding the capitalist slave economy as well as an entire chapter on Black motherhood describing the ways that society perceives and treats Black mothers; and utterly blames her for the destruction and dysfunction of her family. “Matriarchs” they are called to explain their dominating natures and practices that always seems to scare Black men away from their responsibility to raise a family. Black women, according to King, are the cause for the turmoil she faces and the conditions she finds herself in. These notes are important for explaining what I mean my motherhood as praxis and the urgency for “other-mothers” to counter the negative tropes that Black women are expecting to fill. The stark descriptions of how Black women were treated literally sent chills down my spine. I could not help but to imagine the



psychological trauma that this had on the women who endured such maltreatment and dehumanization. I was curious to know how such cruel and wicked historical events contribute to the collective consciousness of Black women and the intergenerational transference on to the psyche of Black women today. Getting the opportunity to read what has been done to Black women and what has been said about Black women impacted my self-esteem in myriad ways. The ways that Black women resisted through organizing and consciousness-raising intrigued me. Both courses validated my position in identity politics and urged me to explore the burgeoning field of BFT even more deeply. But it was my individual directed studies (IDS) that really provided substantive knowledge about Black women. I heard the beautiful yet stoic chiming of bell hooks and was immediately alarmed and called to action. It was hooks who used the term critical vigilance that I would later on augment and make an operable concept in my plan of study. The remarkable and poetic Audre Lorde who explains in *Sister Outsider* what she means by “the personal is political”. Lorde enlightened me about the constructive uses of difference, of anger, and of “coming to voice”. She warns all Black women that our “silence will not protect” us. Patricia Hill Collins, too, sheds light on the collective silencing of Black women and encourages us to become cultural producers on the premise of oppositional knowledge. Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Lorraine Hansberry, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and other strong writers inspired, motivated, and educated me to learn more about me and about us. The activism of Angela Davis, Sister Souljah, Assata Shakur, and even Beyoncé moves me in a way that is indescribable. In addition, pan-Africanists like Amy Garvey and Dr. Frances Cress-Welsing, to name a few, are exemplary in demonstrating how intelligent and powerful Black women are, always been, and need to be. In the undertaking of my IDS’s, I came to realize that Black women are noteworthy and embody an abundance of knowledge in their being. I also found out that our historical oppression, current marginalization, and our fractured collective consciousness is no accident. The Black feminist thinkers and activists that I mentioned all gave stark illustrations of the conditions that Black women are faced with and live in on a daily basis – then and now. These Black feminists all share the same sentiment: the state of Black womanhood was and is still under siege. This includes her mental state, her physical state, her economical state, her spiritual state, etc. Black women’s well-being was and is still at stake. These Black feminist thinkers and activists believe strongly in documentation and in breaking the silence -and urge other Black women do the same- because as Zora Neale Hurston says, “If you are silent about your pain, they’ll kill you and say you enjoyed it”. One other thing they all acknowledge is that there’s more work to be done and to do. Repairing and healing from old wounds is not easy and will require much unpacking and remedy. But it’s a task that we must embark on if we desire optimal well-being for ourselves, our families, and our communities. We must work for our wellness and every aspect of it. It is on this premise that the **Room for Improvement Project** grounds itself. The **Room for Improvement Project** is a manifestation of my plan of study.



Acknowledgements

I acknowledge all those who played a direct role in the completion of my plan of study including my advisor and supervisor, Honor Ford-Smith and Sarah Flicker, respectively.

I also want to express gratitude to two men whose efforts and words of encouragement meant more than I ever imagined. The first is Howard Ruttenberg, Professor and Acting Chair of History and Philosophy at York College, New York City. I appreciate all the times that Professor Ruttenberg came looking for me around campus to ensure that I made it to philosophy class. I remember a time when I was so tired and tried my hardest to not fall asleep in his class. But I couldn't help it. I remember him being so upset and I couldn't understand why. The next day I went to see him in his office to apologize for the disrespect. The last thing I wanted him to feel was like he was boring. Others thought he was, but not me. He accepted my apology. I asked him why he was upset. He said that he saw something in me and that he's afraid that it would be brought to nought if I didn't become aware of it and learn how to use it. I didn't understand it then, but I sure do now. He saw my potential and he wanted me to see it too.

The other man that I wish to acknowledge is Hans Rollman, a Teaching Assistant for the Sociology of Gender course at York University during my undergrad. I remember, vividly, arriving at the tutorial late, pregnant and unprepared for a group presentation. My group partner decided to go solo. There was literally ten minutes left in the class and it was do or fail for me. I stood up, bravely, and said that I want to present. Hans looked confused, but allowed me to do my thing. I stood in front of the class and gave an oral presentation relying on the bits of information I retained from the readings. Hans was clearly impressed because after the class was dismissed, he approached me. He asked me if I was considering graduate school. I said no - which was the truth. He told me that I should and that if I needed a reference, he would be one. He congratulated me on my presentation. Little did he know that it was an impromptu presentation –and little did I know that I would not only consider graduate school, but would actually be here -now. I am grateful for the reference he provided. But what I appreciate the most about both men is the fact that they recognized me and didn't consider it a loss or gain to inform me of my greatness. I give thanks for these men for sincerely believing in me so much so that I started to believe in myself as well.

I thank my parents for their contribution to my existence. My dad, especially, for letting me know in one way or another of the importance of obtaining an education.

My son, Nicholas Lee Hayden, I acknowledge that you are an incredible source of my inspiration. You truly motivate me to improve and be better. I love you so much. Be inspired.



Preface

The **Room for Improvement Project (R4IP)** fulfills the requirements and objectives of my plan of study in myriad ways. My plan of study places Black women at the center of my research and uses Black feminist perspectives to unpack, explore, and understand various barriers to our well-being that are both actual and perceived.

With keen attention on my learning strategies via the courses *Feminist Perspectives in Environmental Studies*; *Popular Education 1 & 2*; *Health and Environment*; *Qualitative Research Methods*; and *Community Organizing*, **R4IP** brings the plan of study to fruition –and expands the vision even further. The foundational principles of this project are: inspiration, motivation, and education. The courses mentioned above helped me with developing the theoretical framework, the methodologies, and with honing my facilitation skills in order for the foundational principles to flourish during the process. These three facets will aid to theoretically dispel the myths that were spelled out in the plan of study regarding Black women and their families. Because **R4IP** aims to create spaces for women, in particular, to engage in activities and exercises where the objectives serve to inspire agency and highlight the power found in self-definition, the values of **R4IP** are incorporated in a manner that stimulates critical thinking and vigilance. *Critical vigilance* is an operative term and concept used in my plan of study to describe what I define and interpret as praxis in popular education (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2013). It is the combination of observing and questioning that which you observe simultaneously in a manner that calls for multiple perspectives at one time.

This document contains information about **R4IP** including the project's vision and values; research question and methodology; and an examination of the activities undertaken at the pilot workshop on March 12, 2016. It details the objectives and instructions of the principle activities; is furnished with participants' responses and illustrations; and concludes with theorizing **R4IP** using Black feminist perspectives. This document is a physical representation and fulfillment of the objectives stated in the plan of study.

I did my best to capture and translate the beauty and the essence of the pilot workshop including the participants' responses and their contributions into words on these pages. I hope the reader of this document can grasp the intentions and objectives clearly, but I have ascertained –from my attempts of analytically reporting **R4IP**- that the **Room for Improvement Project** is to be felt and experienced rather than explained.



Introduction

Welcome to the Room for Improvement: Self-esteem Exploration

“Whether we learn how to love ourselves and others will depend on the presence of a loving environment. Self-love cannot flourish in isolation.”

— bell hooks

The **Room for Improvement Project** is simply a set of activities offered in a workshop format. The activities are deliberately designed to facilitate a safe process whereby visibly Black women (and women of color) can explore self-esteem for the purposes of stimulating critical thinking -in the least- and action towards personal transformation, at best. In the grand scheme, the **Room for**

Improvement Project (R4IP) endeavors to unpack multiple barriers to Black women’s well-being, but sees it fit to address and underscore self-esteem first.

The underscoring of self-esteem is pertinent to answering my research questions: What is critical vigilance? What does it look like in the lives of Black women? On the pages to follow, I will demonstrate how **R4IP** sparked critical vigilance in the participants by way of the activities and exercises.

Recruitment and Participants

On March 12, 2016 three free workshops were scheduled to introduce **R4IP** for the first time. As a resident of Peel region, I chose to recruit in my local community and surrounding area of Brampton. I also posted invitations on my Facebook page; sent out emails and text messages to all the women of color on my contact list; and handed out flyers to visibly Black women in and outside of the human services office where various forms of social assistance is handled. A total of nine participants experienced **R4IP** that day. Four women attended the first session which was scheduled from

The Room for Improvement Project (R4IP) was exercised as a pilot workshop on March 12, 2016. A pre-trial was done on March 5, 2016 with five participants. The experience of the pre-trial gave insight on how- and another opportunity -to make the official launch of R4IP better and more effective. Details of the pre-trial including the insights gathered from the experience can be found in the Structural Criticism section of this document.



Sample Recruitment Letter

11am to 2pm. No participant came to session two which was from 3pm to 6pm. Only five women came to the last session which was from 7pm to 10pm.

Date and times: Saturday, March 12, 2016: 11:00am to 2:00pm; 3:00pm to 6:00pm; OR 7:00pm to 10:00pm

Location: Party Room of 4 Knightsbridge Rd, Brampton, ON

DEAR BEAUTIFUL WOMAN, YOUR PARTICIPATION IS KINDLY BEING REQUESTED.

I am facilitating a series of FREE workshops to explore self-esteem. I am hoping we can work together via dialogue, interaction, and arts-based activities to increase our awareness, resiliency and competence about the importance of cultivating high self-esteem in ourselves –and to ensure that our children’s self-esteem is developing in a healthy way. I am doing this as part of completing my Masters in Environmental Studies degree.

Through dialogue-driven exercises and arts-based activities, we will be discussing and demonstrating the ways in which low self-esteem develops; what self-esteem deficiency may look like; and strategize on ways to “critically intervene” to build high self-esteem.

The workshops will be video-taped and audio-recorded. But as a participant, you will remain **anonymous** and **no identifying information will be disclosed** if this research project gets published.

You can choose to stop participating at any time. Any contribution that you made will not be included in the final output of this research project.

Complimentary refreshments will be available



For more information about the workshop or the research project, please do not hesitate to contact me directly. Email: Tamika.jarrett@gmail.com (Mobile) 647-527-4585. In the meantime, consult my blog: room4improvement.org.

Sample Consent Form

Date: _____

Study Name: “Room for Improvement”: Unpacking Barriers to Black Women’s Well-being
With particular focus on Self-esteem

Researcher: Tamika Jarrett, B.A.
Masters candidate
Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University
647-527-4585
Tamika.jarrett@gmail.com

Research Purpose, Goals, and or Objectives: In this research project, I will be pilot testing a workshop approach to bring Black women together for the purposes of exploring self-esteem as an important factor in well-being.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research:

You are being asked to participate in a three hour process of unpacking barriers to Black women’s well-being. As a participant, you will be asked to physically, verbally and/or artistically respond to questions, instructions, or prompts that serve to stimulate critical thinking about high and low self-esteem.

Benefits of Research and Benefits to the Participant: This research is part of my MES Major Project. Data gathered from this research project will be used to develop new programs to improve self-esteem and unpack other barriers to well-being.

You will receive a complimentary meal and refreshments in exchange for your time. You will also, hopefully, walk away from the workshop with a stronger sense of self and a proactive attitude underscoring the idea that there is always room for improvement.

Risks and Discomforts: The expected risks and discomforts are minimal. *Reflection* and *dialogue* are crucial components in the workshop exercises and activities, and also for meeting the objectives of this study. Sometimes it is difficult to open up in group spaces. You will not be pushed to share anything that you are not ready to disclose at the time.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time.

Withdrawal from the Study: You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. If you decide to stop participating, you will still be eligible to receive any incentive that was promised. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researchers, York University, or any other group associated with this project. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible.



Confidentiality: There will be no identifying information tying you directly to this research project or York University. All information you supply during the research will be held in strict confidence and, unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. Recordings will be used for generating data and as reflective guides to make future workshops better and more efficient. Information gathered will be securely kept on file or in storage for a minimum of two years and will be deleted and/or destroyed thereafter. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

Questions About the Research? If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact me or my supervisor, Dr. Sarah Flicker, either by telephone at (416) 736-2100, extension 20728 or by e-mail (Flicker@yorku.ca). This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Sr. Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, York Research Tower, York University (telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca).

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I _____, consent to participate in *“Room for Improvement”* conducted by **Tamika Jarrett, B.A.** I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature _____
Participant

Date _____

Signature _____
Principal Investigator

Date _____

Consent for image, audio, video recordings and photographs:

I, _____, agree to allow video and/or [digital images or photographs] in which I appear to be used in teaching, scientific presentations and/or publications with the understanding that I will not be identified by name. I am aware that I may withdraw this consent at any time without penalty.

Signature _____
Participant

Date _____



Methodology

Each workshop is designed to explore self-esteem in the lives of Black women in the context of community-based participatory research. Based on a brainstormed and self-practiced list of activities; group exercises; and preselected questions to spark dialogue, I gathered data from the participants' undertaking of the exercises and activities using diverse mediums including:

1. Audio recordings – each session was audio recorded and later transcribed based on general themes and patterns developed from participants' responses and theoretically assessed using Black Feminist Thought
2. Photographs – all work produced in the “principle activities” will be photographically documented (e.g. dream boards). These photos will then be processed and saved and may be later used in a gallery or in publication of the final output of this project –a workshop developer/coordinator portfolio.
3. Personal Reflections – a minimum of 1 hour will be spent after each and every workshop to write a reflective journal about how I feel about the way the workshop went; what I wish I could change; what I plan to do next time; unforeseen issues that arose; further questions to think about etc.
4. Art- some participants consented to leave the actual artwork they produced with **R4IP** for interpretive analysis.
5. Collection of Cue cards for **evaluation** purposes
 - a. “A Better Way”
 - b. “Hand, Head, Heart”
 - c. “Words from the participants”

Why Art?

Art is beauty. Art is life. Art is a language. Art is inspiration, motivation, and education. Because art is all of these things and more, the Room for Improvement Project (R4I) uses art both as a mode of expression and sharing; and a means for communicating that which is often times hard to explain or demonstrate in conventional ways. Some of the topics explored and the issues that may arise in R4I may be complex, and art is a strategy employed to help translate, unpack, and simplify the matters for better understanding and dissemination. The Room for Improvement uses art to pave accessible and inclusive ways for knowledge production, collective knowledge-sharing; consciousness-raising; and insight. Art helps to break the silence and serves as a medium in coming to voice.



A Typical Design Loom

The workshop is modeled on dialogue, group interaction, and arts-based activities that aim to explore self-esteem and facilitate high self-esteem building in an anti-oppressive, Black feminist framework. The main objective of this project and workshop is to create collective knowledge-making and knowledge-sharing spaces that are conducive for stimulating critical thinking and reflection; fosters motivation; inspires action; and facilitate the empowerment of the participants.

N.B. This workshop is intended for a specific audience, but because of the anti-oppressive nature of its design and the underlying approach to liberation, **Room for Improvement** can be undertaken with diverse audiences.

Room for Improvement can be workshopped for 180 minutes or all day. Below is sample workshop design that I personally created and wish to facilitate.

Principle activities	Instructions	Time	Evaluation/Objective	Materials
<p>"Making the connection": Mind, body, and soul.</p> <p>Ad-lib facilitation:</p> <p>"Right now, just focusing on breathing- feel the breath- hear the breath, and experience the breath. In this moment- right now- the breath is what is important. Feel it travel from your toes upward</p>	<p>-Breathing – Inhale, hold, release (repeat 5 to 10 times)</p> <p>-Stretching – Up, down, side to side (repeat); head spin (both directions, repeat); waist turn, spin (both directions);</p> <p>Breathe & Stretch – Incorporate breathing and stretching in a</p>	<p>10 minutes , total</p>	<p>-Get participants to focus in on <i>self</i> and get grounded into the process easily. Helps relax the mind and create openness for the spirit to flow.</p> <p>-Get participants to get in touch with their bodies and realize it's not separate, more or less important than the breathing (mind and spirit).</p> <p>-Allow participants to be freely moved. Recognize that in this space it is safe to explore</p>	<p>-Open space</p> <p>-Anti-stress fragrant candle</p> <p>-meditation music</p>



through all your cavities. Slowly-feel it-experience the breath- for it is free. Be free in your breathing. Inhale it, hold it, and release it gently when you are ready. Be free. The breath is free. Be free with it. In this space, like breath, you are free."	freestyle way, dance, maneuver		and be in control of self.	
Forming the Circle Have participants form a circle for the seating position.		3 minutes	Allow time for participants to share how they feel/what they think about the exercise/process thus far.	-enough chairs for each participant
ICEBREAKER What is the largest space on the planet where we can all enter at the same time without a fee?	"The Room for Improvement" WELCOME	7 minutes	-Take this opportunity to quickly talk about myself and my research. -Go over objectives and Rules. -Invite brief questions about project and expectations.	-Consent forms
State Your Name for the Record: Naming Ourselves	What is your name? Is there a meaning behind it? If you could rename	5 minutes 5	-Establishing dominion over the self; examining control and authority: where does it start? Where does it end?	-enough seats for each participant



<p>"One thing my momma told me was..."</p>	<p>yourself, what would that name be? Why?</p> <p>-Name a saying you heard a lot growing up. What did it mean to you then? What does it mean to you now?</p>	<p>minutes</p> <p>5 minutes</p> <p>10 minutes</p>	<p>-reclaiming ownership of writing our own stories.</p> <p>"We are not merely passive reactors but active contestants in the drama of our lives" Nathaniel Branden, Honoring the Self, pg. 42</p>	
<p>Sentence Completion Rounds</p> <p>-Can be done in one large group, small groups, one-on-one</p> <p>-Can be done standing or sitting in a circle</p> <p>-Start a sentence stem and ask participants to complete the stem as we go around the circle</p>	<p>Example stems:</p> <p>1. "If I were to secretly admit how much I like myself..."</p> <p>"A Better Way"</p> <p>"The INNER ROOM" (If small group size and participants consent to one-on-one session)</p>	<p>15-20 minutes</p>	<p>-To stimulate critical thinking about self and other sources that appear to have power to impact our self-esteem</p> <p>-The stems are pre-selected to touch on domains that help shape our self-esteem e.g. parent-child dynamics; education; historical past/culture etc.</p>	<p>-Prepared list of sentence stems</p> <p>-Audio recorder</p>
<p>"Mirror, Mirror..."</p> <p>looking at me"</p> <p>When I look in the mirror, do I like what I see?</p>	<p>CQ: What is self-esteem? Why is it important?</p> <p>This is the question that</p>		<p>-visual introduction to what critical vigilance is, can, and should be.</p> <p>-participants get the chance to both critically think</p>	<p>-Large mirror</p> <p>-Dry erase markers</p> <p>-White board eraser</p> <p>-Cue cards</p> <p>-Tissue paper</p>



<p>Reflections and Perceptions</p> <p>Three-fold mirror exercises:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Participants are asked to take some time to reflect on how they perceive themselves and how they think they are perceived (jot a list). 2. Have participants stare into the mirror for about a minute and then ask the 2 questions and ask them to reply to their reflection. 3. Have participants write some items from the list directly on the mirror and read it 	<p>guides this exercise and activity. The questions or stems that will serve part two of mirror exercise is:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What makes you loveable? "I am loveable because ... 2. Why are you worthy? "I am worthy because ... 3. What I find special about me is? "One thing that is special about me is... 	<p>Part 1: 10 minutes</p> <p>Part 2: 20 minutes</p> <p>Part 3: 15 minutes including debrief</p>	<p>about how they see themselves and how they think they are perceived and write it down. -Then they get to write on a giant mirror their top perceptions of themselves and also list how they want to be seen (not how they think they are seen like the written list). -Photographs of the mirror with responses will be taken.</p>	<p>-Camera</p>
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back to themselves.				
<p>“Look up, look down”: Team building. Facilitator will instruct participants to look down and then look up. The person that you first lock eyes with will be out and subsequently form the small group for CQs.</p> <p>Distribute cue cards to each group with question for critical reflection and group discussion.</p> <p>Assign one group per question.</p>	<p>In a group and using bullet points, brainstorm and explain:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What does high self-esteem look like? 2. What does self-esteem deficiency look like? 3. How can one build high self-esteem? 	<p>6 minutes – “Look up..” game</p> <p>4 minutes – Explain exercise</p> <p>15 minutes – Undertake exercise</p> <p>10 minutes – Sharing</p>	<p>-The purpose of this activity is to stimulate interpersonal connection. Eye contact can say a lot about a person. And we can’t build a community if we can’t connect. And we can’t connect if we don’t look at each other or if we refuse to see each other. Visibility is a key in high self-esteem building</p> <p>-Allow time for participants to share how the activity made them feel and relay the responses generated in the small groups regarding CQs.</p> <p>-Make note of the responses</p> <p>-Did unforeseen <i>issues</i> arise from the debriefing?</p>	<p>-Open space</p> <p>-Cue cards, various colors</p> <p>-Bristol boards</p> <p>-Camera</p> <p>-Tape</p>
Intermission	Break for food, usage of restroom etc.	10 minutes		<p>-Food</p> <p>-Drinks</p> <p>-Napkins</p> <p>-Garbage bags</p> <p>-Cutlery</p>
“One Step Forward, Two	-Select groups from this	15 minutes	-To demonstrate how we are all at	-Large open space



Steps Back” -Use questions from <i>Honoring the Self</i> to instigate movement. If the response is affirmative, take 2 steps forward. If response is negative, take 1 step back.	activity to proceed into next activity - Supplementary questions/prompts		different places occupying various spaces but we all have the capacity to move and change depending on stimulation and motivation. -To critically reflect on power forces that impact self-esteem e.g. child-parent relationships; reproduction; history; culture; and education	-Prepared list of questions/prompts
What’s in a Dream? -Have each participant create a dream board or list of goals, affirmations, and or outcomes (Time: 15mins) -Boards will be photographed	-Have participants form into groups to share boards/lists and discuss the similarities.	15 minutes to complete board 15 minutes to share	-Each group will be given the opportunity to share their dream boards with others. -Each participant gets the chance to share what’s not on the dream board but on their list.	-Magazines -Newspapers -Glue sticks -Bristol boards -Scissors -Camera
The “S” on my Chest... -What does the “S” on your chest stand for? What makes you super? Sentence stem: “When I am overwhelmed...”	Ask each participant to think of their favorite song that can serve as an anthem. Then they are to take an excerpt of the song and design the superman logo	20 minutes	-The purpose of this activity is to demonstrate how to tap into internal sources for our own self-appraisal; how to raise self-esteem with minimal to no support; and another suggestion for self-affirmation	-Pre-cut large superman logos -Tape -Glue -Camera



	to their liking.			
Evaluation: "Head, Heart, Hand/Feet"	What conclusions can we draw from our experiences? Specifically, -What did you learn? -How do you feel? -What can you take with you?	10 minutes	-An opportunity to debrief about the workshop -Q&A -Photograph art work	-Color-coded cue cards -Camera



Principle Activities

These activities are designed intentionally to stimulate critical thinking in the participants; to generate creative and relevant content for research topics for room4improvement.org; and to make future workshops better and more effective through praxis. There are five principle activities that should be undertaken in every session. If time allows, other activities outlined in the design loom can be incorporated. The five principle activities are:

1. "The Inner Room"
2. "A Better Way"
3. "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back"
4. "What's in a Dream?"
5. "Mirror, Mirror"
6. "Stick With It"
7. Evaluation: "Head thinks, Heart feels, Hands do"

The workshop designed to explore self-esteem has a particular trajectory that the principle activities encompass. The three areas that the principle activities cover can be classified and explained as follows:

1. **Where it all starts.** This aspect of the workshop uses critical vigilance to explore the powers that be and influences the development of our self-images and self-concepts. It aims to discover the role of authority, specifically in the family, that impedes or fosters healthy self-esteem growth. Examining the historical, national, cultural, familial, and other institutional influences on women of color's self-esteem is essential because they often times become the very barrier to our current well-being.
2. **Our role in it.** This aspect of the workshop calls for critical vigilance on the self by turning the lens on us –individually and collectively. It instigates inward reflection and admission of practices that we do or don't do to experience wellness in our being. Learning self-love comes through the practice of self-affirmations and self-praise until it becomes a habit. Participants will learn ways of how tapping into themselves as their own source of self-appraisal and rely less or not at all on external validation.



3. **What could we do to make it better?** How can we learn to honor ourselves through inspiration, motivation, and education? How can art be used to express the self that may have been silenced or is afraid to be made visible and heard?

The Inner Room: Sentence Stems

Sentence completion Exercises

Instructions: Simply finish the sentence by expressing the first idea that comes to mind in the first round –and then repeat the same stem again, this time allowing your mind to seek out the honest answer.

Operation: Can be done individually, one-on-one, or as a go-around in a group. Stems can be modified according to the characteristics of the participants. Stems vary from general statements often sensitive and emotional themes. Although this is the primary intent of the exercise, it is meant to be an anti-oppressive practice therefore, participants can pass on a stem or not engage in this activity altogether.

Critical Vigilance: When you ask someone a question, the first response is seldom the truth. People tend to conjure up what they believe the best/right answer is or should be -not what the truth of the matter actually is. Nowadays, we can't rely on answers. We must diligently seek truth and practice honesty –first with the self–until it becomes a habit. Branden notes that we should not be distracted “with such questions as: *Should I be feeling this? Or what does this feeling mean? Or, worse still, what does it imply about me that I am feeling this?*”

Credit: The sentence completion exercise was inspired by and, in the case of most of the stems- may be directly taken from Nathaniel Branden's (1983) “Honoring the Self: Self-esteem and Personal Transformation”.

Main Objectives: “Self-awareness begins with learning to be more conscious of our feelings and emotions” (Branden, pg. 159)

- To assist in the cultivation of self-awareness
- To assist in opening up i.e. opening oneself up for emotional awareness
- Learn the difference between “naming” a feeling and “experiencing” emotions

Few Sentence Stem examples:

1. “If I were to secretly admit how much I like myself...”
2. “If I were to treat my wants with full seriousness...”



3. "Love to me is..."
4. "If I had been given permission to make mistakes..."
5. "The hard thing about growing up is..."
6. "What I wanted from my mother and didn't get was..."
7. "What I wanted from my father and didn't get was..."
8. "With father I felt..."
9. "Mother was always..."
10. "With mother I felt..."
11. "Father was always..."
12. "If it turns out that I'm not a bad person and never was..."

Few Participants' Responses:

1. "What I wanted from my father and didn't get was..."
 - a. A role model; someone who is there for me emotionally and not just financially; respect
 - b. To open more
 - c. His protection
 - d. His 100% presence
 - e. The fatherly role
 - f. Nothing
 - g. Him
 - h. To know him
 - i. More love
2. "Mother was always..."
 - a. Always been there for me; she's kind; she's there when I always need her
 - b. Happy
 - c. Awesome
 - d. Caring
 - e. Working
 - f. There for me
 - g. There
 - h. A dream
 - i. Dainty
3. "Father was always..."
 - a. There... when it's convenient for him
 - b. Standoff-ish
 - c. Absent
 - d. Providing
 - e. Never around
 - f. Someone that I knew but didn't know; absent
 - g. Absent
 - h. Absent
 - i. Cold



4. "Women are to me..."
 - a. Pass (involuntary)
 - b. Strong
 - c. Powerful people
 - d. Bold
 - e. Powerful
 - f. Beautiful
 - g. Strong
 - h. Heavily burdened
5. "Men are to me..."
 - a. Pass (involuntary)
 - b. Cocky
 - c. ?
 - d. Comfort
 - e. Babies
 - f. Strong
 - g. Still trying to figure that out
 - h. Untrustworthy
 - i. Liars
6. "With father I felt..."
 - a. Pass (involuntary)
 - b. Pass
 - c. Unloved
 - d. Protected
 - e. Deserted
 - f. Sorry for him
 - g. I don't know
 - h. A lot of things
 - i. Like I wasn't good enough
7. "With mother I felt..."
 - a. Pass (hesitated then insisted I moved on)
 - b. Pass
 - c. As if I was her world
 - d. Love
 - e. Working
 - f. Secure
 - g. Like I was a mistake
 - h. Never good enough
 - i. Like something was in between us
8. "If it turns out that I'm not a bad person and never was..."
 - a. Pass (involuntary)
 - b. Then I'd be more happy with myself
 - c. I would be perfect
 - d. That'd be great



- e. Skip
- f. I know that I'm not a bad person
- g. I would have started healing sooner
- h. Still trying to believe it

Analysis of the "Inner Room"

The participants' responses in the Inner Room were quite interesting. I found that doing this exercise one-on-one was more effective than in a group. I made this observation after the pre-trial where I found the women there were merely repeating the previous woman's answer instead of giving their own honest answer. The participants' responses in the pilot workshop were stark, riveting, and can be analyzed based on common themes. The first theme I recognized was the admonition evoked by the participants when asked anything about their mother. This came as no surprise to me because from research in Black Feminist Thought and my own experience, mothers are revered as the leader and sustainer of the family. In "Black Womanist Leadership: Tracing the Motherline" (2011) Ferguson and King (Eds.) speaks both about the pathology and pedagogy of "African American mothering" and also about the "salience" of mothers. The influence that Black mothers have on their daughters is paramount in so far that they state: "If motherhood is pedagogy... then the task for Black mothers is to identify and model productive ways for their daughters to survive and thrive" (p. 172). I think Black mothers do an awesome job in teaching us how to survive. But it is the thriving part where I find more room for improvement. In contrast, the participants expressed a tone of resentment when responding about their fathers. Most admitted that their fathers were absent. I wish I could have delved deeper into asking how deeply this absence impacted their concepts of self but the space was not conducive for such deep exploration since I am not a professional therapist or licensed counselor. Mitigating would have been too challenging for me. I did read a few books on psychotherapy and I did research the necessary skills and qualities of a good counselor, but I am not confident in being presumptuous about diagnosing someone or deeming any of the participants in the workshop to have low self-esteem. All I can say is that there is room for improvement.



"A Better Way" to Deal with Emotions

This is the second part of the Inner Room where participants are asked to explore and experience diverse emotions. The emotions are classed in five categories with sentence stems requiring completion. The last stem in each section asks participants for a better way to deal with the emotion. This better is written down on a cue card and collected to gather and create a running list of better ways to deal. List should be posted for everyone to view and take note if desired. List is kept by **R4IP** for future reference and additions.

1. For exploring feelings of pain or hurt:
 - a. "I can remember feeling hurt when..."
 - b. "When I was hurt, I told myself..."
 - c. "Sometimes I feel hurt when..."
 - d. "Sometimes when I am hurt, I..."
 - e. "One of the ways I sometimes hide my hurt is..."
 - f. "If I ever fully admitted when I feel hurt..."

"A better way to deal with my hurt, my pain, my anger... might be..."

A Sample of Participants' Responses





"To talk about it. But to whom?"

"I think I deal with it just fine. I accept the fact that sexuality is healthy and normal"

"A better way to deal with my fear might be to feel the emotion and admitting that I am scared"

"A better way to deal with my sexual excitement might be to allow myself to feel that way"

"A better way to deal with my anger might be to admit I am angry"

"A better way to deal with my hurt is writing it down and being aware of my triggers"

An Analysis of "A Better Way"

A part from exploring emotions, this activity serves to demonstrate agency. I wanted the participants to know that they knew of a better way to deal with their emotions without being told because no one will care about their interests more than them. In exploring emotions, I found Audre Lorde's quote to be true when she wrote that "pain is important: how we evade it, how we succumb to it, how we deal with it, how we transcend". Further, Lorde notes that "our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge". Through the other activities (e.g. "Stick with it") it was ascertained that one of the important elements in self-esteem building is trust. Participants must learn to trust themselves and be accountable for their own healing. They have that authority and this exercise validated such claim. Alice Walker stated that "the most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any". This exercise reminded the participants that they do have power. And they need to use it to self-define. The advice of Marva Collins justly suffices: "Trust yourself. Think for yourself. Speak for yourself. Be yourself. Imitation is suicide."



“One Step Forward, Two Steps Back”

This activity is similar to the children’s game “Red light, green Light” and requires a minimum of 2 participants and 1 facilitator to read the instructions and direct the activity.

Needed:

- A pre-written sheet of questions or prompts to instigate movement from participants.
- Open space and a designated finish line.

Instructions:

- The facilitator must ask the participants to form a horizontal line in the middle of the room.
- Participants will then move according to the questions or prompts suggested by the facilitator.

For example: If there are three participants and all are women, the facilitator can suggest that the whoever is born in Canada should take one step forward while those who are born outside of Canada should take two steps back.

Objective:

The objective of this activity is to physically demonstrate and disprove the notion that we are all born equal or start life off on equal playing fields. Many factors shape and determine our movement in certain environments, societies, and the world at large. Critical vigilance on this activity suggests the struggle the self faces in its emergence and securing a sense worth and belonging. It is so hard to be yourself when there are many powers at play. This activity brings awareness of power forces and structures that participants may not have known was influencing their mobility and well-being.

Sample list of prompts

Most of the questions found in this questionnaire are taken directly from Nathaniel Branden’s *Honoring the Self: Self-esteem and Personal Transformation*. The questions are considered valuable in its ability to allow vulnerability and openness to be achieved and are used for research purposes in gauging self-esteem and inspiring critical reflection on the importance of self-esteem personally, but also the significance in creating environments that are conducive for high self-esteem building, particularly in children and youth. The use of the questions is three-fold for the sake of this research project. One way in which the questions will be used is in the form of a general and anonymous survey. Another way in which the



questions will be used in within the context of a workshop whereby the questions become integral objects that stimulate movement, reflection, and critical thinking on the interplay between self-esteem and movement. A third way in which Branden's questions are used in this research project will be in the form of one-on-one interviews with consensual participants to further investigate various dimensions of self-esteem (building). Notes from all three ways of working with Branden's questions will be taken and further analyzed for distinctions made, discussions that generated, and further directives, if any. Below is a sample list of Branden's questions pages 29 to 33. They are not intended to be an exhaustive list, but rather an arsenal in which to borrow from.

Select 5 to 20 questions depending on group size and space available for movement. Do not exceed 20 questions.

1. When you were a child, did your parents' manner of behaving and of dealing with you give you the impression that you were living in a world that was rational, predictable, and intelligible? Or a world that was contradictory, bewildering, and unknowable?
2. Were you taught the importance of learning to think and of cultivating your intelligence?
3. Did your parents provide you with intellectual stimulation and convey the idea that the use of your mind can be an exciting adventure?
4. Were you encouraged to think independently and to develop your critical faculty?
5. Or were you encouraged to be obedient rather than mentally active and questioning?
6. Did your parents project that it was more important to conform to what other people believed than to discover what is true?
7. When your parents wanted you to do something, did they appeal to your understanding and give you reasons, when possible and appropriate, for their request? Or did they communicate, in effect, "Do it because I say so"?
8. Did you feel free to express your views openly, without fear of punishment?
9. Did your parents communicate their disapproval of your thoughts, desires, or behavior by means of humor, teasing, or sarcasm?
10. Did your parents treat you with respect?
11. Were your thoughts, needs, and feelings given consideration?
12. Was your dignity as a human being acknowledged?
13. When you expressed ideas or opinions, were they taken seriously?



An Analysis of "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back"

This group activity is quite profound and sparked the most dialogue in all the sessions. In the first session, there were four participants. Three out of the four were repeatedly taking steps back until there was no more room to move backward. I decided to end the activity at that point. When we returned to the circle, the participant who was moving forward shared that she felt very uncomfortable during the activity. She expressed that she wondered if the other participants failed to understand the questions why they were retreating instead of progressing. She went on further to say how unreal it was that she was fortunate to grow up in a home and family that intellectually stimulated her while others didn't and how easily she took that for granted. She became emotional and explained that she couldn't help but to wonder how her children would move if they were to participate. She said that she found herself reflecting on her parenting and could now see that there's room for improvement on that front. The other participants expressed that they wish they grew up in her home or had her parents. The woman proudly stated that she didn't have parents –just a wonderful mother that took motherhood seriously.

This activity showed me that making the connection to childhood experiences when exploring self-esteem was not as easy or as clear as I thought. This activity illuminated the direct correlation between high self-esteem and appropriate parenting. This activity also gave me insight into my own parenting and I am so careful as to how I cultivate my child's mental development.



“What’s in a Dream?”

I believe it was Oprah Winfrey who said that “Self-esteem means knowing you are the dream.” The dream/vision board activity felt good to watch. The participants seemed very engaged in not only imagining their futures, but taking the time to out make it visual. In examining the dream/vision boards, I found that each woman present envisioned bright and prosperous futures despite family upbringing, historical oppression, or the way they perceived themselves in the current moment. Some women illustrated their hopes of marriage and becoming a mother. Others dreamt of traveling the world. One participant desired to plant her own food in the near future. I was heartwarming to see that the women had vision and were optimistic about the future. What I learned and felt was a resonance of C.S. Lewis when he declared: “You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream.” Creating the dream/vision board is an act of agency and it is critical vigilance in practice.

Needed: Various magazines, scissors, tape, construction paper or Bristol board, and glue.

Instructions: Participants are to cut and paste words, phrases, and or images from the magazines that resonate with them in terms of bringing their dreams to life.

Example of a Participant’s dream board:





“MIRROR, MIRROR”

Needed:

A large full-body mirror; whiteboard markers, and a whiteboard erasers or jiffy

Instructions:

The facilitator should have each participant, one at a time, stare at their reflection in the mirror for a minimum of one minute. A line should be drawn horizontally or vertically to split the mirror in half. On one half, the participant should write down in list form all the ways they see themselves. On the other half, the participant should write down all the ways that they think that they are seen. Facilitator should write down what is on the mirror before it's erased for the other participant to use. After each participant gets to view the mirror, we gather back as a group to discuss both perspectives. As a group, we will engage in a discussion that leads to the question: how we want to be seen.

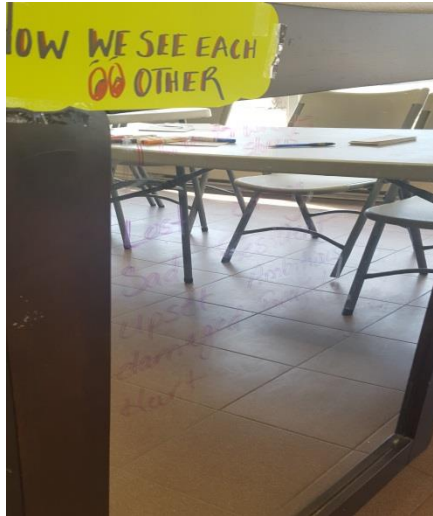
Objective:

This activity gives the participants the opportunity to get an up close and personal look at themselves and to be transparent in their responses as to how they are seen through their eyes and the eyes of others. Recognizing that both perceptions may not match or line up, dialogue is generated surrounding the disparity and also rectifying which perception matters the most.

*"If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be
crunched into other people's fantasies for me and
eaten alive"*
-June Jordan

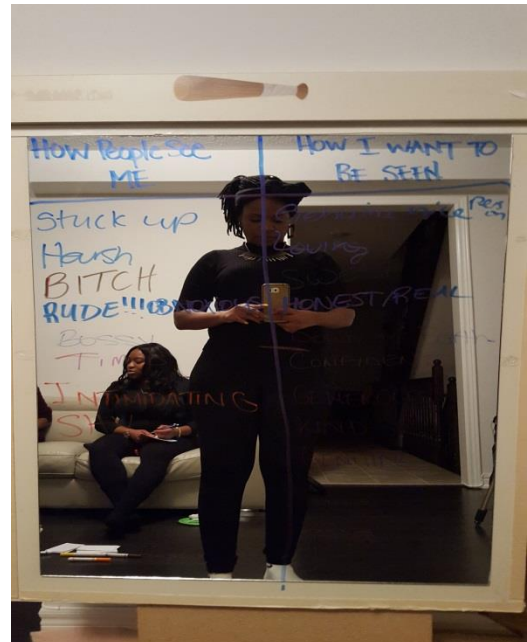


The way I approached "Mirror, Mirror" in the pilot workshop was different from the pre-trial. I used two large mirrors and divided them into two halves using a whiteboard marker which gave me four columns. I placed and labelled the superficial columns of the mirrors and instructed the women to: approach the mirror when it was free and when they were ready; and to first just stare at their reflection; then fill in each column accordingly. Some of the responses startled me because I didn't expect such negative perceptions. This activity made me realize that the room for improvement is real and isn't just a project for meeting the requirements of a program. This is our reality. It takes critical vigilance to look beyond theory and to meet people at their point of need or at least direct them to the room for improvement. This activity validates my hidden hypothesis that we, Black women, don't feel too good about ourselves because our perceptions are distorted.



Top: Pilot workshop, session 1.

Bottom: Pre-trial workshop, March 5, 2016.





What I learned from observing the artwork produced was that each participant had a general idea of what self-esteem was and what was essentially needed to build and maintain high self-esteem. I also learned that the ability to recognize what is deemed to be high self-esteem has no bearing on how a person feels or perceives herself. Most of the women expressed in some degree via "Mirror, Mirror" for example, that they perceived themselves in a deficient and negative way. Yet, all women seemed to know what it takes. I think of Greg Anderson who speaks about the difference in developmental motivation versus deficiency motivation and see how his threefold method to the former plays out. In most cases, people have the knowledge and the desire to change but lack the skills. Or sometimes they have the skills and knowledge but lack the desire. All three is necessary for change to happen.

"Stick With It!"

Needed:

Plenty of Popsicle sticks; glue; markers; construction paper; tape; work station

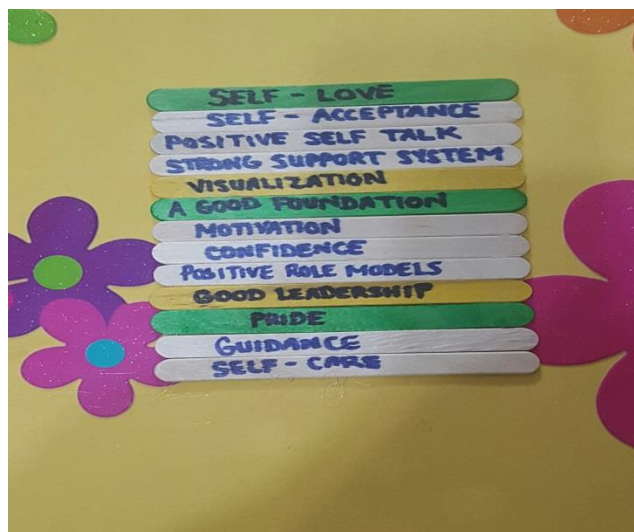
Instructions:

Have participants sit at the workstation and use their creativity to explore self-esteem by using the Popsicle sticks.

Objective:

The objective of this activity is to acquire what is considered essential components to self-esteem. Each Popsicle stick represents an integral part needed to develop high self-esteem. Gluing the sticks together demonstrates that we have to "stick with it" to build and maintain high self-esteem

Below is an example of "Stick With It" completed by a participant in the last session.





Reviewing the evaluations indicated that it is an effective way in ascertaining how the workshop impacted the participants. The feedback suggests that some form of critical thinking or a shift in their perceptions (critical vigilance) on self and others took place.

If no other activity answered my initial research question, this evaluation exercise surely does. What is critical vigilance in the lives of Black women? It is the ability to look within the self and acknowledge, reflect, and experience what is thought and felt and choose a course of action that leads to liberation and well-being – first for yourself and then for others -for as Kimberle Crenshaw informs us, "The empowerment of Black women constitutes the empowerment of our entire community."

Participants' Evaluations

This exercise is used to evaluate the workshop experience from the perspective of the participants. Each participant is given three color-coded cue cards to write down what they are thinking; how they are feeling; and what they plan to do (differently) or can now do after participating in the workshop. Below are a few evaluations:

Head Thinks

I think that this is a very good way to explore self and the various activities are needed because we all have different experiences and the various activities will connect with each person in its own unique way.
-Reina

I think this workshop is well needed and Tamika is genuine and authentic. Providing a safe space allows for vulnerabilities.

Think that this program will make a difference. I think that this program gives us –us black women- a chance to unpack and reflect.

I think this is very good as most of the stuff talked about is what is happening in today's society and a lot of people fail to recognize this.

I can do anything I put my mind to and not feel that just because I am shy that things won't happen to me.

I think it's good. I need to reflect more often



*I feel so much appreciation for life
and all it has blessed me with in
this very moment.*

-Reina

Heart Feels

I feel much better about myself.

*I feel empowered and more self-
aware.*

*I feel renewed, confident, and I
have learned a lot which makes me
feel uplifting*

*Good. Good discussion, sharing,
same sphere.*

*I feel happy that this program is
available. It will help us.*

*I am happy about myself and how
I look at being a Black woman.*

Hands Do

*I will do more positive thinking and
talking –realizing that I’m able,
capable, and worth it.*

*I am going to work on my goals. I
will set a goal weekly and work
towards it. I will treat myself. I will
do self-care.*

*I will think more highly of myself. I
will set goals to accomplish that
are realistic.*

*I will work towards my goals; work
on myself; keep focus; love
myself; and accept myself for who
I am.*

*I need to put my goals into
fruition. It’s time to act.*



Structural Criticism (pre-trial on March 5, 2016)

I am glad I was afforded the opportunity to run the workshop before the official pilot launch on March 12, 2016. During this session, I was faced with a lot of unforeseen issues including time management; logistics concerning space and participant capacity; and the way and manner in which I explained my intentions and objectives of the workshop. I also got the chance to experience the emotional component of the overall process -what I failed to consider prior. It is not just the emotions evoked by the participants, but I didn't anticipate accounting my own feelings.

As much as I wanted to appear, sound, and remain professional since I was operating in the capacity of a facilitator, I couldn't help being moved and tempted to participate as if was one of them. The truth hit me –I was one of them. Our experiences, though unique, were similar enough to engage in a process that calls for vulnerability. I had to make a note of this for the upcoming workshop: how much do I want to participate? Should or would the participants expect me to participate? And, if so, how much of me should I give or how deeply should I go? What are their expectations of me?

The pre-trial workshop had a total of 5 participants. Even though I felt capable and confident to facilitate a group of up to 20 people, I already knew that the smaller the group size, the more comfortable it'll be to manage. The women in this session were familiar with each other, but I only knew the host through a mutual friend. I was invited to a house warming and was led to inquire who would be interested in workshop. The host offered to let me use her new home and her friends on the condition that I provide food and my infamous decadent cheesecake. I agreed. She picked the date and time, and I arrived with my supplies.

The lugging of the supplies for the workshop made me realize that an extra pair of hands would be helpful. My supervisor had mentioned it to me but I brushed it off because I am so accustomed to doing things on my own. But carrying an art tool box, bedroom suite dresser mirror, and the food supplies raised a red flag causing me to panic. The longer it takes me to lug everything takes away from the time allotted for setting up which may consequently run into the already limited time for running the workshop. This is precisely what happened on the day of the pre-trial and what I couldn't afford to happen on the day of the official launch.



Overall, the pre-trial workshop was awesome. It gave me a chance to refine the activities and structure the agenda accordingly. Below, I break down the structural criticism into three categories and will do this for subsequent criticisms to follow after the upcoming sessions.

What I liked

I liked and appreciated how interested the women were before hearing anything that I had to say. This warm reception helped reduce the anxiety that I was feeling. When I got into explaining the research, the women were so attentive. I remembered thinking that the host must have did an amazing job in “selling” me to her friends and family, because I was not expecting such respect or admiration.

I also loved the fact that they all willingly participated and were open to sharing bits of information about their past, sexuality, or deep emotions that may be rendered as private or uncomfortable. It made engaging easy and honestly boosted my confidence.

The remarks made and the comments given prior and during the workshop reassured me that I was doing something good and effective even though at times I find myself doubting the viability of this work. The feedback given afterwards via the evaluations and just general statements were comforting and encouraging –and made me look forward to the “real” workshop with optimism.

What I didn't like

I didn't like the fact that we didn't get through all the activities. To be honest, we didn't get to any of the art. Not only did this defeat the purpose of packing and lugging the equipment, it limited the amount of knowledge that could have been produced. The brainstorming was fruitful because it led to enriching dialogue, but not doing each activity and exercises means that the women did not get the fullness of the workshop experience that I intended.

What I would change

I would definitely change the sitter that I chose for my son. I needed someone more accommodating and not so precise on the time that I said I would return. I would also change the location of the workshop –opting for more space. The house was cozy and contributed to the intimate aura I wanted to build, but more space is needed for one activity in particular that is profound. I would change the fact that I didn't have enough time by trying to adhere to the agenda and not allowing the group to go on tangents, diverting from the topic at hand.



Structural Criticism 1 (March 12, 2016)

I am so impressed with how the first session went. Only four women showed up. At first, I was nervous and a bit embarrassed. I feel that I could have done more recruiting. Thank goodness I hired an assistant who I trained and understood the principles and values of R4I because it was her who reminded me that whether it's one or ten participants, I must inspire, motivate, and educate anyway. She was right. To make me feel better she agreed to participate in the session outside of her paid role. Before the women arrived, my assistant and I set up space quickly as possible because I was adamant to not be off schedule this time around. The anti-stress candle was lit -giving the room the aromatherapy conducive for relaxing the mind. The food table was spread with breakfast delights like bagels, donuts, muffins, fresh fruit, orange juice, and water. Tables were designated for showcasing used children's toys and books that could be freely taken by the participants. The window shades were up and the beautiful light of the sun came shining in. The women arrived one by one. My assistant gave them consent forms to look over and sign and indicated that refreshments could be eaten at any time during the three hour workshop. I checked to see if audio recorders were in place, working, and on. I knew from listening to the pre-trial workshop that I spoke clearly and loud enough for the recorder. I had to urge the participants to speak up.

The first session was awesome. The participants didn't want it to end. And neither did me. I knew that no one confirmed for the second session and I was excited about that. I knew this would give me time to make the last session better –and also time to reflect on the process and write in my journal.

What I liked

I loved the attitudes and energy of all the participants in this session. Like the pre-trial, the women gave me a warm reception and their support overwhelmed me. I liked the fact that they were open –more so than I expected. I like that they weren't afraid to shed tears. This meant that something in the workshop evoked such a response. It made me feel like the objective which is to get the women to think critically was being fulfilled. They were crying because they were thinking. And while they were thinking, they were feeling. It became a cathartic experience for all of us. I like the feeling of sisterhood that I felt in that moment. It underscored a yearning that I had for a long time and the importance of it: support.

What I didn't like

The only thing I didn't like about this session was the fact that I was not prepared when I should have been prepared for emotional outbursts in the form of tears. I



had no Kleenex. When the tears began to flow, I had to urge my assistant to run to the assigned bathroom and grab a roll of toilet paper. This is extremely tacky, but desperate times calls for desperate measures. The women didn't mind, of course. But I didn't like it. I also didn't like the fact that the women were not eating as much. There was plenty of food that I didn't want wasted, so I urged the women to take plates to go.

What I would change

I would have did more recruiting or pay someone to recruit for me because more people should have been there to at least eat if not participate in the workshop. The attendance at the first session made me wish that I had only scheduled two sessions instead of three in one day because now I have to stay just in case someone does come for session 2.

Structural Criticism 2

I had ample time to revamp the room to prepare for this last session. I was expecting nine women, but only five came out. For the last session, I set up a candy stand and changed the menu from breakfast selections to dinner appetizers. I re-structured the space and titled each table as a workstation and placed appropriate supplies on them. I pre-organized the evaluation cards. I was ready. Like the sessions before, these women were just as receptive but not as open in their sharing as the other women. I felt that I was losing momentum, but quickly realized that the work was emotional labor and it was draining me. I was still excited to facilitate and hear what the women had to say, but I felt a little distant this time around. I decided to get a plate with some food to nibble on to increase my energy. I'm not sure if it helped. I just hope it wasn't obvious to the others. I did make a mental note of it, however: I must administer self-care especially when dealing with vulnerable people. I know somethings I get overly empathetic and absorb the feelings of others, but I have to work on it if I am to do this kind of work.

The last session was just as remarkable as the others. I can't wait to sit down and listen to the audio tapes to keenly hear the discussion and find a way to interpret what it all means.



What I liked

I liked the warm welcome and the encouragement that I received from this group of women. I liked the questions a few of them asked that created a Segway for bringing up other topics. I liked the effort this group put into the art work. They didn't rush through it like the women in the last session. They were thoughtful and produced precisely what they vision and dream of on paper.

What I didn't like

I wish all the women in this session were open like the other women. I got the most amounts of voluntary and involuntary passes during the "Inner Room" exercise than the other groups. I am not certain on the cause for this and will probably make conjectures and hypothesize probable factors later in my analysis.

I also didn't like the fact that they were not taking advantage by devouring the book table or the used toys table. It's free! I posted signage that said to take more than one. But each woman only took one book.

What I would change

There is not much that I would change about this session because I took session two to refine everything. There was a moment where the discussion diverted to talking about sexuality beyond the intended scope, and I wish that I could retract what I said. I may have spoken out-of-line and gave inaccurate information with no basis on or for the Room for Improvement.



Words from the Participants

"Tamika is a passionate person, individual, black female, mother, and presenter who is determined to be a change agent in her community and the Region of Peel. I am happy that Tamika's "Room for Improvement" exists. It should be in every classroom and wherever black girls exist."
-Staceyan

"Love the experience. Will take it with me as it contributes to who I am"
-Reina

"Empowering"
-Anonymous

"Dreamer! Visionary! Leader!"
-Anonymous

"This Room for Improvement workshop has been truly special to me. I knew deep down that there were issues within me, but I did whatever was necessary to ignore it, hide it, and lie about it... just not deal with it. I will now speak about the different activities that evoked emotions for me: Mirror, Mirror – this activity forced me to truly look at myself. We look in the mirror, but never face ourselves. I found it very difficult to face the person looking back at me. I never really appreciated my features –my skin, my complexion. This gave me an opportunity to do that. Inner Room – this was by far the most difficult for me, but also the most rewarding. I had no choice but to admit to myself that I wasn't truly happy, and that my past experiences have a lot to do with where I am in my life. The Vision/Dream Board – this was a first for me... to actually take the ideas out of my mind and make them tangible. I was confronted with my future goals, my dreams, how much I've changed, and what my true self desires. I am leaving here thinking about me, the inner me. Thank you.



Personal Reflection

I am still relishing in the euphoria that I am left here feeling after such a wonderful day. Today's workshop revealed that we not only need, but recognize that there is room for improvement in all our lives. I am glad that I decided that the first "room" would be designed to explore self-esteem because all the women agreed that as women of color, we face a particular plight that causes much damage to our self-esteem. Coming together is essential because we not only get to collectively identify barriers to our well-being, we get to participating in brainstorming (what I like to refer to as consciousness-raising) to ascertain possible solutions, interventions, alternatives, or other strategies of resistance. It was refreshing to know that each participant was eager to brainstorm and share insights from their own lived experiences. There was an unsaid consensus that something like R4IP was important –not just for ourselves, but for our children and communities. Their openness made my job as the facilitator easier than I expected. This is precisely why I have great appreciation for popular education because it respects the fact that everybody knows a little something-something and are experts by way of their experiences. Though the women were informed that was a grad student pursuing my masters; and I "passed" off as a professional especially by the way I speak – they were not intimidated to speak up and speak back, or afraid to challenge me.

"Without community, there is no liberation"
-Audre Lorde

The women who participated in R4IP's pilot project appeared to be genuinely interested in everything I had to say and didn't refuse to engage in the activities and discussions. I was delightfully surprised that the women opened up and shared personal stories from their lived experiences without gentle and careful pressure through various facilitative techniques. I didn't have to dig or pry. The women were eager to dialogue. The women did not refrain from commending me on the job that I was doing. They went as far as encouraging me to continue and recommended that R4IP be incorporated in schools and shelters. All the praise is overwhelming. Especially since I didn't believe that the Room for Improvement would ever happen.



I have a confession. I struggle with self-doubt. For most of my years I have been told by family, friends, and random strangers that I was smart, intelligent, and destined for success. I never believed for a long time. And even as life showed me in myriad ways that I can elevate and transcend, my greatness frightened me terribly. I am a confident person. But I also feel like I'm a curse. I feel like I don't deserve success; or that if I do, it'll be extra hard to attain it. Nothing has been or has come easy in my life and I was beginning to think that I was setting myself up to fail. This self-doubt left me for a while and I was able to complete college and an undergraduate degree. I now find myself in graduate school being weighed down once more by self-doubt. The environment I found myself in didn't help the cause either. I remember the day when I began to feel like an imposter. It was the day when I realized that there was not many black people in the faculty. The feeling was reinforced when I introduced myself to my advisor. Let's just say it was not a warm reception. Then, I was told after trying to explain my intentions regarding my plan of study that I would "be here for a while" with a look of confused disdain on the speaker's face. I considered it a low blow. I thought to myself that I must be out of my league here. I am an imposter. But I couldn't quit. Even with the cloud of self-doubt hanging over my head, I was compelled to stay. I was miserable. I am destitute. I enjoyed my studies but school was no longer making sense to me. School was beginning to fuck with my self-esteem. So as it grew closer to the end of the program, I started to believe that I wouldn't make it out; that I wouldn't complete the program; that I would indeed be here for a while. The Room for Improvement was just wishful thinking. It sounded good in theory and on paper, but to bring it to fruition seemed more than a trick –it was a set up to fail. But I wrote the proposal. And I am grateful for my supervisor who told me that it could be more than just a philosophical idea. Without those words, today would be a dream deferred.

*"We have been raised to fear the
yes within ourselves, our deepest
cravings"*
-Audre Lorde

The Room for Improvement is more than a dream. Today proved to me that R4IP is actually a vision. Curating R4IP was subconsciously created for myself to be reminded that there's room to improve. I, myself, still struggle with maintaining a



high self-esteem. Just as I desire for other Black women to step into R4IP, I must also and always be willing to step in. I truly believe that everything happens for a reason. By inviting women to enter R4IP, apart from creating the space and tools for critical reflection on the self –I am also hoping that critical vigilance on each other can occur. I have come to realize the importance of support and sisterhood and how helpful we could be to each other on our individual journeys to improve in effort to achieve optimal well-being. It's so hard to document the feelings I am experiencing right now. This must be what joy and happiness feels like. I feel good. I feel like I am doing something good. I feel like the Room for Improvement is a good thing that can be improved to be even better. The kind words of the participants filled my heart with warmth. They commended me on my professionalism. Some said they believed that this is my calling. Others couldn't believe that it was the first time I was conducting the workshop. Their praises boosted my confidence and humility. Their words affirmed and aligned my purpose with my passion –to assist in the liberation of Black women.

I spent about two days transcribing 7 hours of audio recordings. I had to stop many times because it was awkward to hear my own voice speaking as an educator and facilitator. It was so surreal that stopping the recorder was the only mitigating factor at the time. After getting over myself and remembering that listening to the sessions was part of my methodology, I committed the time necessary to thoroughly and attentively listen to the voices of the women to hear what it was they were saying. Jotting down the responses to various questions was the easy part. It was the discussion that was challenging because when emotions are involved, it's hard to ascertain an accurate interpretation. But there were a few things said by some of the women that can be categorized and themed. Without extensive explanation, I found that the participants all got the gist of the exercises and activities where the objective was to stimulate critical thinking about factors that shape who we are and who we become. Their understanding of this was expressed in various ways. Some of the women described experiences that evoked tears. Others verbally explained the shift in their perception after engaging in the workshop.

The main finding that I wish to purport is that each woman left the workshop with critical vigilance. They all can now see that there is always room for improvement no matter what. But it starts with the self.



Theorizing the Room for Improvement

"I am a feminist, and what that means to me is much the same as the meaning of the fact that I am Black: it means that I must undertake to love myself and to respect myself as though my very life depends upon self-love and self-respect"

-June Jordan

In this section, I will provide a brief analysis using Black feminist thought to theorize the Room for Improvement. Black feminist thought is a burgeoning field expounding on a plethora of issues, themes, and experiences that are peculiar to women of color. In this analysis, I will focus on three tenets of Black feminist thought and use the workshop experience to further substantiate the need to contribute to this burgeoning field. The Room for Improvement will explicate what Black feminist thought means by consciousness-raising, “breaking the silence” and “coming to voice”, and the production of oppositional knowledge.

Consciousness-raising in Black Feminist Thought

Consciousness-raising is one of the first steps in black women organizing. Black feminist consciousness-raising became a viable tactic and strategy in Black women organizing in the United States. Consciousness-raising was borne in response to the Women’s Liberation movement of the 60’s and 70’s in which the needs, interests, desires, and experiences of Black women were not included, considered, or understood in the white middle-class mainstream movement. This exclusion subsequently compelled Black women to meet on their own to discuss their day-to-activities while simultaneously highlighting their oppressive conditions. Through the collective sharing of their daily experiences, Black women began to realize that they would have to champion their own cause and fight for their rights independent of the mainstream. Discovering that their oppression was shared, Black women reflected on and strategized ways to overcome and or navigate oppressive systems. And so, once again, Black women began to organize.



Consciousness-raising in the Room for Improvement

The Room for Improvement Project (R4IP) pilot workshop is a prime example of what a process of consciousness-raising may look like. The space was designated for Black women, especially, and it felt good to know that we had this space to talk about us and the oppression that intersects our lives. It was just us Black girls in the room sharing some deep things about ourselves; exploring something that we are told in so many ways doesn't matter: high self-esteem. Self-esteem exploration is vital for Black women because dominant narratives and stereotypes are constantly in play to distort any healthy image a Black girl or women should have. In the process of consciousness-raising in **R4IP**, we were able to discover the urgency in coming to voice by breaking the silence to precisely challenge what's being said and what's already been established about Black women.

"When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak"

-Audre Lorde

Breaking the Silence and Coming to Voice

I must admit that when I got the approval to curate **R4IP** as a project, I was feeling timid, anxious, and reluctant. I know that it's a challenge to not only get Black women a room together on a friendly basis, but also in getting them to open up and share things in a group setting. Black women are programed to remain silent on many issues –especially the issues that serve to traumatize and damage us. I knew it wouldn't be easy, but it would be worth it. Although I wanted the women participating in the **R4IP** pilot workshop to break the silence, I was honestly afraid of what might be said and more importantly, how what is said makes us feel –the speaker, the hearers, and me, the facilitator. Fears surrounding my capacity to mitigate almost crippled me. But I could not retreat. Breaking the silence and coming to voice was integral in the healing process. Breaking the silence and coming to voice is essential for creating oppositional knowledge.

"Your silence will not protect you"

-Audre Lorde



Creating Oppositional Knowledge

What I found exceptionally interesting in the R4IP pilot workshop, especially in the brainstorming sessions and the “Mirror, Mirror” exercise was that none of the women there wanted to be seen in an adverse way even though they recognized that they are perceived in a negative way. This proves that acceptance is a form of resistance. I find R4IP to be exemplary and effective in providing the space for oppositional knowledge to be produced and shared. The women had a good idea of where and how negative stereotypes are developed; and why and how they are perpetuated. Most importantly, the women were stimulated by way of the exercises to conjure up ways to challenge dominant narratives. As a group, we ascertained that with agency and a commitment to define ourselves was the best place to start. Creating oppositional knowledge is empowering.

"Nothing I accept about myself can be used against me to diminish me"
-Audre Lorde



Conclusion

"If you don't understand yourself, you don't understand anybody else"
-Nikki Giovanni

The **Room for Improvement Project** is all about growth. It uses developmental motivation to encourage participants to start where they are, with what they have, and with acceptance of who they are. When they accept who they are then they must begin to love that person and administer self-care often and regularly. I truly believe that if we are not honoring ourselves or working towards that end- in terms of becoming and being, simultaneously- by the very pursuit of wellness that we are doing our children, especially, and our community, our society, our environment, and our planet a disservice.

We cannot do better if we don't become better. In order to become better we must first raise our consciousness to believe that we deserve better because we are worth it. Then we must break the silence and come to voice by understanding that we are responsible for our own healing and that no one is held accountable if things are swept under the rug and kept in silence. For self-esteem to emerge and rise, the self must first be seen and heard. Black women must be self-assertive and advocate our cause because no one else will speak positively on our behalf or consider our interests more important than we do. The **Room for Improvement's** activities and exercises not only calls attention to the self, but it reminds the self that it is important. Black women, you are enough. Black women, you are worth it.

"If any female feels she needs anything beyond herself to legitimate and validate her existence, she is already giving away her power to be self-defining, her agency"
-bell hooks



What's next?

"I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own"

-Audre Lorde

I am overwhelmed by all the kind words and feedback I received during and after the R4I pilot workshop. The attendants present all wanted to know when I was going to do the workshop again; when other rooms for improvement would be introduced; and what other barriers can we look forward to unpacking. I am so delighted that the participants not only wanted more, but they admit that there's always room for improvement.

"Revolution is not a one-time event"

-Audre Lorde

I was told that I should try to get into school boards or placed in a school as a guidance counsellor of some sort. I was told that the program would benefit children and men, as well. All the encouragement made me think critically about the future and what part R4I could play in it. I don't know what's next for R4I, but I am confident that it has a future. I already started a blog to inspire, motivate, and educate readers at room4improvement.org. I am also contemplating registering R4I as a non-profit organization so that I can be eligible to receive grants to finance taking **R4I** on the road. But until then, I will continue to be light shining brightly and beckoning those within my reach to step into the room for improvement.

In the meantime, I am working on organizing a follow-up "Talk" for the women who participated in the pilot project. I project that this meeting should be within six weeks of the official launch. The women are looking forward to this so I want to make the follow-up session more inspirational, informative, and engaging. I already started looking for guest speakers or organizations whose vision and values are similar to that of **R4I** to come in and share their work and ideas with the women in efforts to inspire, motivate, and educate.



Additional Thoughts

I am cognizant that there's room for improvement for this project and subsequent workshops in the future. Activities have to be reviewed and revised to take many factors into consideration. Though this pilot workshop focused on self-esteem and highlighted parental influences on the child's self-concept, there are other barriers that need to be unpacked to achieve well-being and there is a lot more to be said about self-esteem before moving forward to unpack the other barriers.

Using Branden's work to guide the self-esteem exploration was quite effective but it does not accurately denote the other factors that impact a Black women's self-esteem, in particular. For instance, there are no distinctions made between, or an acknowledgment of race, class, and gender as systems that affect the self-esteem of racialized women. Illuminating the other domains of power and authority and explaining their interconnection is integral in understanding why visibly Black women may suffer from low self-esteem or the challenge of maintaining high self-esteem. Oppression is multiform and only an intersectional approach could capture the realities of the experiences of Black women.

Admittedly, I don't like the term women of color. When I say that the Room for Improvement is for Black women, I mean it's for any woman that identifies as such. A participant in R4I expressed her disdain for the term 'Black'. She went on to explain that she refuses to call herself Black but knew that she was being referenced in the invitation. She further added that she believed that to be 'Black' suggests that you are unaware of the manufacturing of a pseudo race that is negative and derogatory in behavior. "Nothing good comes from being Black", she said, "and I prefer to be called an African or melanin instead of being called Black". This admission is paramount for introducing certain themes like slavery, post-colonial slavery, heteronormativity to name a few. But because of the time allotted for each workshop, I deliberately chose to not use the Segway for bringing up new topics but to just stick to the agenda. But these topics must be addressed and discussed in order to ascertain the rationale behind the faction and dysfunction of Black women, her family, and her community.

In liberation politics, to practice freedom (Freire, 1970) one has to not only be able to identify the oppressor, but to also be able to recognize if and when they are identifying with the oppressor. I, especially as the facilitator, must be critically vigilant to ensure that I don't promote oppression or perpetuate the very oppressive systems that need to be dismantled in order for true liberation. For instance, one of the activities featured in R4I calls for magazine cut-outs that



resonate with their dreams, visions, and aspirations. The magazines that were available to use had little to no Black visibility. If Black people were present, it was in the manner of upholding heteronormativity where patriarchy, sexism and misogyny prevail by the exclusion or dehumanization of others. This activity, as well as some others, must be revised to make sure they are anti-oppressive in nature and in practice; or decide on a way to still use them as is to spark critical dialogue about the absence and erasure of Black women or to contest their positions when they are included.

Optimal well-being can only be achieved if and when we can be our true authentic self. This workshop encourages women to self-identify as a way to reclaim their agency. Inspiring the participants to be critical thinkers and to be critically vigilant is the primary goal of R4I. Motivating the participants by education for the purposes of highlighting the barriers in order to dismantle or to better navigate them to be and become well is pertinent. The Room for Improvement project is for colored women who have the desire to improve not only themselves, but their families and communities as well.

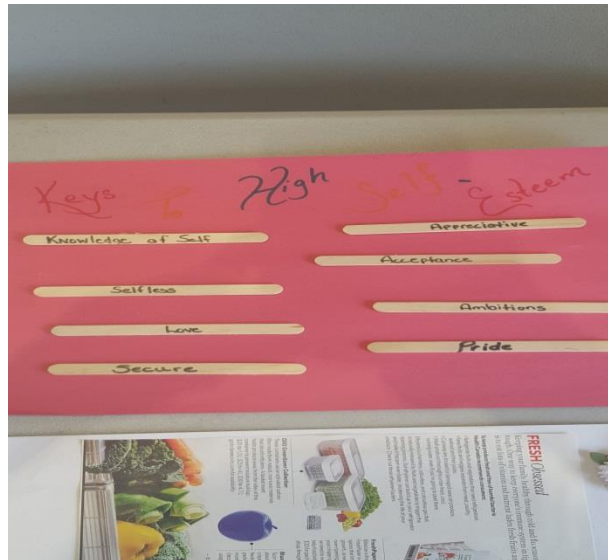


Appendix - Gallery



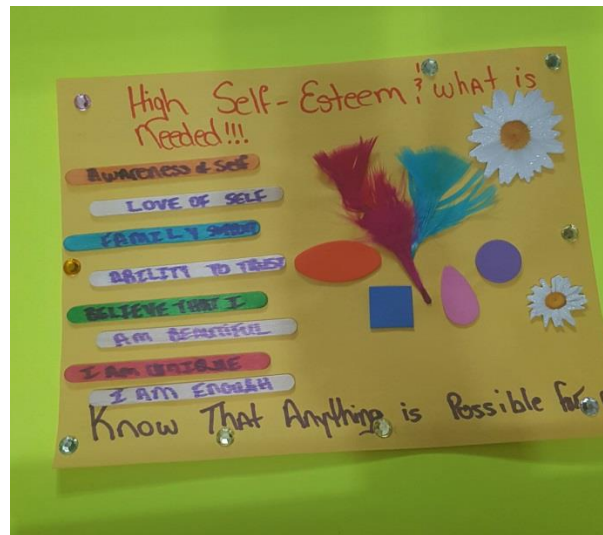
A look Inside the Room for Improvement





Examples of "Stick With It"





Examples of "Stick With It"



Examples of "What's in a Dream?"



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